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Notes and Opinions.

SHOULD THE BIBLE BE TAUGHT AS LITERATURE IN OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS?

This question has been recently brought forward in a prominent way by a statement made before the National Educational Association by President Nicholas Murray Butler of Columbia University, New York, and by a resolution passed by that body advocating such instruction. The resolution reads :

It is apparent that familiarity with the English Bible, as a masterpiece of literature, is rapidly decreasing among the pupils of our schools. This is the direct result of a conception which regards the Bible as a theological book merely, and thereby leads to its exclusion from the schools of some states as a subject of reading and study. We hope and ask for such a change of public sentiment in this regard as will permit and encourage the English Bible, now honored by name in many schools, laws, and state constitutions, to be read and studied as a literary work of the highest and purest type side by side with the poetry and prose which it has inspired and in large part formed.

The statement made by President Butler was a portion of his longer address on "Problems of Education." He said, with regard to the restoration of the Bible to the public schools :

I want to call attention to a phenomenon which is so universal that we do not notice it—paradoxical though that sounds—but which, if it is permitted to continue, will one day produce most startling results in our life and civilization. I refer to the fact that, owing to a series of causes operating over a considerable period of years, knowledge of the English Bible is passing out of the life of the rising generation; and with the knowledge of the Bible there is fast disappearing any acquaintance with the religious element which has shaped our civilization from the beginning. Not long ago President Thwing of Western Reserve University printed in the *Century Magazine* the results of an ingenious inquiry on this subject which he carried on among college students. His purpose was not to find out what they knew about theology or what they believed about religion. His purpose was to find out what they knew about the greatest work of English literature. Those of you who have read that paper will remember the astounding results that this inquiry revealed.

In what I now say about the English Bible I want to make myself clearly understood. I want to make this fundamental distinction clear: I am not

now talking about instruction in religion, important as many conceive that to be ; I am not now talking about instruction in theology, important as some feel that to be ; I am merely laying down this thesis : the neglect of the English Bible incapacitates the rising generation to read and appreciate the masterpieces of English literature, from Chaucer to Browning, and it strikes out of their consciousness one element, and for centuries the controlling element, in the production of your civilization and mine. I hold this to be true even if there were not one person living in the United States who subscribed to a single article of any Christian creed. I am speaking now about literature and life, not about religion or theology.

Teachers all over this land are trying to teach Chaucer and Spencer and Shakespeare, Tennyson and Browning. How are they to understand men who refer to the Bible, that veritable treasure-house of literature, on every page, if they cannot take children to the source from which the supply is drawn ? How are they to discuss and interpret the style of Ruskin, of Carlyle, of Emerson ? How are they to teach the history of the heroes of our own independence, many of whom were religious in every fiber of their being, and whose work will continue to bear the stamp put upon it at the beginning, utterly regardless of what has become of religious faith in the interval ? How is one to teach the truth as history reveals it unless he teaches the whole truth ? And yet, see what has happened : The quarreling of religious sects, of churches, each claiming this book for its own and denying the truth of what other persons found in it, has brought about a state of affairs in which the English Bible, a fountain of English literature, has been practically stricken from the reading of the American people. I contend that we are not only on the point of impoverishing life and literature by this neglect of the English Bible, but we have already impoverished life and literature. I am not dealing with a problem that lies in the future ; I am speaking of a condition which is at hand. We are impoverishing life and literature by striking out of our life and our reading one great monument of our literary line, the source from which much of what is best in later centuries is drawn, the inspiration upon which the best English style has been built.

One of the resolutions passed by the International Sunday School Convention, held in Denver last June, speaks more briefly, but in the same direction :

WHEREAS, The Bible is not only the inspired word of God, but also the world's greatest treasury of literature, and its reading is now excluded from most of the public schools of America ;

Resolved, That the Executive Committee is instructed to appoint a standing committee, whose duty it shall be to consider what means should be taken in the various states and provinces to secure the reading of the Bible without comment in the public schools of our land.

Dr. Washington Gladden, in his latest collection of addresses entitled

Social Salvation (pp. 173 f., 177 f.), also speaks of the need of Bible instruction in the public schools, even when viewed merely from a literary standpoint:

Whatever the moral and spiritual value of the Bible may be, there can be no question that it occupies a place in our literature which makes a fair knowledge of it essential to every educated man, no matter what his faith may be. The Bible is woven through all our literature; names, words, phrases borrowed from it, allusions to it, are found on almost every page; without a good knowledge of it much of what he reads will be unintelligible to the reader; familiarity with the Bible lights up with beautiful significance many a passage which would otherwise be enigmatical. There is no book in our language which has been used in this way one-hundredth part as much as has the Bible; and for the purposes of general intelligence it is therefore one hundred times as necessary that one should know the Bible as that he should any other book. This is the fact upon which educators ought to insist. I think that they are beginning to make their voices heard. We have now upon the stage a generation which has grown up without any instruction in the Bible in the public schools, and the depth and breadth of popular ignorance respecting the Bible is something astonishing.

It appears to me that something of this nature may yet be hoped for in connection with our public education, and that the subject is one which the Christian ministry ought to keep in sight. Whatever is done must be done with great prudence, and it must be evident that the interests in view are not those of dogmatism, but rather of general intelligence. We study Homer, the Bible of the old pagan Greeks, in our schools, with no objection; doubtless if anyone wanted to study the *Zendavesta*, the religious book of the old Persians, or the *Nibelungenlied*, the religious book of the Scandinavians, that would be thought innocent, if not laudable; but the proposition to study our own Bible, which, from every point of view—as literature, as history, as philosophy, as moral teaching—is infinitely more important than any or all of these, seems to fill the minds of some people with vague alarms. There seems to be no reason in this, and I hope that by and by we shall get ashamed of it, and bring the Bible back into our schools. To make it the basis of doctrinal teaching would be, of course, impossible; but we might have the occasional reverent reading of it; and we might, at least, teach the pupils to discern the beauty of its poetry and the glory of its eloquence and the uplifting power of its prophetic ideals.